



San Diego launches landmark water project

By Mike Lee /h5>

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Despite earlier reservations, San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders on Thursday kicked off a pilot project to test the feasibility of turning wastewater into drinking water.

The city's \$11.8 million Water Purification Demonstration Project will operate at least into 2013 under scrutiny by the state Department of Public Health, which regulates drinking water. Public tours are available by calling the city utility department at (619)533-6638 or registering online at sandiego.gov/water/waterreuse/demo/.

Sanders initially opposed the test plant, going so far as to veto council-approved plans to start it in 2007. He raised concerns about the cost of a large-scale operation and said San Diegans had already shown their lack of support for the concept, which had been derided as "toilet-to-tap." The council quickly overrode Sanders' veto, keeping the project on track.

On Thursday, Sanders cast the potential for a new water source as one of the biggest issues of his administration. The city relies almost exclusively on water imported from the Colorado River and the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta -- increasingly expensive sources over which San Diego has little control.

"He is going to let the science do the talking," said mayoral spokesman Alex Roth. "His concern from Day 1 and his concern today is he just wants to make sure that it's scientifically sound and safe. Presumably, this pilot study will give us those answers."

As Sanders warmed to the idea, so have residents. A recent countywide poll showed 67 percent of respondents supported the use of ultraclean recycled water in their taps, up from 63 percent in 2009 and 28 percent in the pre-drought days of 2005.

The current city project will produce 1 million gallons of re-purified water per day, none of which will be sent to the reservoir. If the project is expanded into a full-scale treatment facility, re-purified water likely would be sent to the San Vicente Reservoir near Lakeside to mix with water from other sources.

The Water Reliability Coalition, an affiliation of environmental, consumer, business, labor, development, taxpayer and technical organizations, issued a statement on Thursday supporting San Diego's experiment.



San Diego's newest utility facility will attempt to turn wastewater into a new source of drinking water for the city. — Howard Lipin



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“We’re not the first city to explore this safe water supply option,” said coalition leader Gabriel Solmer of San Diego Coastkeeper. “In Southern California, the Irvine Ranch Water District has distributed recycled water for over 30 years and Orange County has added highly purified recycled wastewater to groundwater supplies that residents use as a source of drinking water. This technology is used around the world.”

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